

Chapter 1: Rationale for Studying Foreign Languages

Studying a foreign language completes and improves a student's education while providing the foundation for further personal enrichment, scholastic achievement, and economic opportunities. The need for California's students to learn and understand a foreign language is more evident today than in times past. In recent years California has been transforming its educational system so that the children and state's future leaders are able to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. This Framework seeks to improve foreign language education with the Language Learning Continuum. The Continuum sets clearly defined goals while allowing for flexibility in local curriculum. The need for foreign language instruction for all students is clearly evident when examining academic achievement, educational reform, and leadership in the global economy.

Academic Achievement

The ability to communicate in a language other than one's own enables students to grow academically and personally. Competence in communicating in languages other than English enriches learning and creates a new foundation for intellectual growth that is unique to language studies. Not only are students mastering another subject but also creating a new source of academic and personal enrichment. The student of music who studies Italian learns the language for many nineteenth century operas; the student of science who studies German finds an opening to another community of scientists; the student of economics who studies Chinese comes to understand the full effects of

globalization. In short, learning a language opens new doors and expands the opportunities to learn.

Learning a new linguistic system means acquiring an objective view of one's native language, and indeed of one's own culture. The structural elements of language, the range of ideas expressible in a language, the intense interdependence of language and culture—all these become apparent as the student becomes increasingly proficient in a new language. With these understandings comes a more sophisticated appreciation of the structures and patterns of the new language, as well as a better understanding of the learner's own language.

Rather than seeing foreign language studies as simply another area of study, they should be seen as a vital partner in enhancing student achievement in all areas.

Educational Reform

Support for studying foreign language is also to be found in the recent reforms in California's educational system. In 1995 California began reforming its school system so that students would attain the knowledge and skills that pupils will need in order to succeed in the information-based, global economy of the 21st century. The creation of academic content standards in language arts, mathematics, science and history-social science established the overall goal of California's education system—international comparability. In advanced and developing countries, students are expected to have competency in one foreign language and to have studied a third language by the time they complete their secondary education. This Framework seeks to promote foreign language instruction and acquisition and have California reach the international standard.

This Framework supports another important reform—extension of advanced placement opportunities. In 1998, AB 2216 (Escutia, Chapter 793) was signed into law by then-Governor Pete Wilson. This legislation seeks to create more opportunities for students, especially those in economically disadvantaged areas, to take advanced placement courses. The advanced placement program, which is overseen by the College Entrance Examination Board, gives students the chance to earn college credit in high school. Such courses are demanding but also create an expectation of students being college bound. By relying on the Language Learning Continuum, this Framework seeks to prepare more students at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels for further foreign language studies, including advanced placement courses.

Leadership in the Global Economy

For California students to become world-class business leaders, they will require an education comparable to their overseas peers. European and Asian students begin their foreign language education in elementary school. Educators and policy makers in their countries recognize that language instruction begun at an early age allows more time to develop proficiency. In Germany, children begin to study a foreign language in the fifth grade; in Japan and Korea, in the sixth grade. Consequently, in international business negotiations, the majority of business leaders from California today know less about the Japanese culture and language than their Japanese counterparts about English and the culture of the U.S. (*Restructuring California Education*, report of the California Business Roundtable).

Communication across distances and cultures every day becomes more essential to global understanding and economic prosperity. Nowhere is this truer than in

California, with its dynamic international economy and multiethnic population. In its report *Vision: California 2010*, the California Economic Development Corporation noted that the state is the sixth greatest economic power in the world and emphasizes that education must play the primary role if California is to sustain this position. The report strongly recommends that one strategy for higher education should be to “internationalize all curricula to provide greater understanding of our place in the global economy, through international studies and stronger requirements for foreign languages and cultures” (p.30).

In the world marketplace, American students compete with students from other nations who have been required to learn two or three languages (*NASSP Bulletin*, 1994). The need to be competitive also is expressed by the California Business Roundtable in its report, *Restructuring California Education*. California competes in the world economy with an increasing emphasis on new markets of the Pacific Rim. For California businesses to reach their global economic potential, their representatives will need to know the culture and customs of the countries with whose representatives they are negotiating.

Today California reflects the realities of the global economy, as its schools are the meeting grounds for the world’s languages. More than 300 languages are spoken in the state’s schools, and virtually all schoolchildren meet classmates whose home language is different from their own. Young Californians’ careers, associations, and friendships will bring them into contact with diverse peoples, communities, and cultures. As noted by the business leaders, tomorrow belongs to those whose language skills enable them to build bridges to new peoples and cultures. Foreign language studies not only create a basis for

- 92 understanding one's classmates but also for welcoming the opportunities of the
- 93 international marketplace.